

Tempering radicals? Student activism and the (im)possibility of social change in business schools

Emily Cook-Lundgren*, Independent researcher,
ecooklundgren@gmail.com

Laure Leglise*, Manchester Metropolitan University,
l.leglise@mmu.ac.uk

Introduction

Amidst widening global inequalities and financial and climate crises, there have been increasing calls for business schools and management education to play a leading role in facilitating sustainable development and transformative social change (e.g., George et al., 2016; Neal, 2017). This is epitomized in initiatives such as the United Nations Principles for Responsible Education (PRME), which engages business and management schools to adopt and integrate responsible management principles in support of the Sustainable Development Goals (PRME Secretariat, 2021). In response to this, a growing body of literature focuses on questions of how and to what extent sustainable development principles have been mainstreamed in business and management programs (Abdelgarfar, 2021; Weybrecht, 2022; The PRME Global Movement, 2021) as well as developing and sharing related pedagogical tools (Brower, 2017; Foray et al., 2015). Yet, despite proclaimed commitments from business and management schools, evidence suggests that the uptake and integration of sustainable development principles is fragmented and superficial (Abdelgarfar, 2021; Weybrecht, 2022); that business and management schools are, at best, slow to change and possibly even resistant to the kind of change required in commitments to sustainable development (Hoffman, 2023). Further, critical scholarship highlights the implication of business schools and management in poverty and inequality (Fotaki & Prasad, 2015; Kumar & Cooke, 2022), calling into question their potential to play any role in addressing such problems.

A key question is how business schools can change. While PRME puts pressure as an external actor, change can also come from the inside. Beyond the specific case of business schools, a literature developed around insider social change agents. Insider social change agents are defined as agents acting “within their workplace organizations to pursue changes that could address their organization’s role in urgent societal and environmental challenges” (Heucher et al., 2024, p.296). However, this literature is fragmented. Heucher et al. (2024) have identified five “streams” in this literature: employee activism, issue selling, tempered radicalism, micro-corporate social responsibility, and social intrapreneurship. These streams look at the micro-foundations of social change. Among these five streams, tempered radicalism provides a lens to observe the tensions between belonging and exclusion, and ambivalence from the

tempered radicals which opens the opportunity to observe nuanced behaviors. Tempered radicals are characterized by their dedication and allegiance to their organizations, while simultaneously holding strong commitments to causes, communities, or ideologies that diverge significantly from the prevailing culture within their organization (Meyerson et Scully, 1995). They are both insiders and at the same time outsiders with different interests and agendas (Kjærgaard et al., 2023). Meyerson and Scully (1995) identify several strategies of change and ambivalence: small wins, local and spontaneous action, language strategies, affiliations with people who represent both sides of their identity.

Much of the extant literature on the role of business schools in social change focuses on institutional reports, PRME chapters, or experiences of faculty and other institutional leaders attempting to integrate sustainable development into business and management programs (Burchell et al., 2015; Contu, 2020). For instance, the works using the tempered radicalism lens to investigate internal change agents have focused on faculty rather than students (Kjærgaard et al., 2023; Meyerson & Scully, 1995). There is notably little research on the role and experience of students in these efforts. This is surprising given the strong demand from business and management students for a focus on societal issues. Indeed, according to a 2020 survey, half of incoming business students indicated wanting a job focused on social impact at some point in their careers (Jack, 2020). This echoes previous research suggesting that the majority of business students view learning about social and environmental issues as a priority (Net Impact, 2014). Given the student demand for the incorporation of sustainable development into their business and management education and the inconsistent progress of institutions to do this, the absence of student voices represents a major limitation in our understanding of the role of business schools in social change. Further, students, as future managers and leaders, merit engagement as key stakeholders in debates around sustainable development efforts in business and management education (Reynolds & Dang, 2017). To address this, the proposed study will explore the role and experience of students with a social education or professional background in MBA programs, asking specifically how these MBA students experience social change education within a business school and how they navigate or challenge constraints.

Method

This research builds on 15 exploratory qualitative interviews carried out with students and alumni of business school programs in the US and UK between November 2022 and January 2023, in the context of a different project on social entrepreneurship in business schools. For the next phase of the process, we employ critical qualitative inquiry, also understood as social justice or ethically responsible activist qualitative research (Denzin, 2016), situating ourselves as in relation to participants not only as researchers but also as political actors with commitments to challenging systems of oppression and organizing for liberatory social change. We aim to interview a minimum of 40 students in business schools globally, with the possibility of follow up interviews as appropriate.

Our initial analysis of the 15 interviews entailed open coding by both authors, then comparison of codes, and identification of potential themes. It is expected that analysis of the full sample will

follow a similar process, within the parameters of the research questions and in the spirit of critical qualitative inquiry (i.e., attention to power and inequities).

Indicative Findings

The exploratory interviews suggest that business school students pursue social change as tempered radicals through *strategies* of advocacy, organizing, and mobilizing resources including peer networks (within and between business schools) and faculty support. For example, one student described how he coordinated with students at other business schools to assess actual programming and course offerings in sustainability in an effort to push business schools to live up to their claims:

I did this benchmarking exercise with others mainly business schools like Columbia, Wharton, Stanford, Michigan, Ross Yale, like the number of courses they offered, and like the types of initiatives that they had going. And then we did like a survey among the students like, what more, what other types of classes will they want? And what do they want more of a push on? So we presented it to faculty across and to the new Dean and kind of like advocating mainly. (Miguel/PID02)

HOLD

Efforts towards social change are in turn tempered by institutional and structural factors in two primary ways: first, in *material* ways, such as the high cost of business school education and associated pressure to pursue lucrative career paths, and second, in *ideological* ways, manifested for example in curricular offerings and content as well as through dominant business school culture.

One student described how, despite the school's proclaimed commitments around social change and impact, these topics remained marginalized in the MBA program and this, combined with the material reality of more lucrative prospects in non-social impact jobs, functioned to temper students' own commitments to social impact:

It was still marginalized, I think, within the program. It was not centered in the program. You know I went from a world where, like everyone was interested in impact...now surrounded by people who come from very for profit, high salary kinds of careers where they have pretty different values than I did. And when you're surrounded by that, it's really hard not to get sucked in and so it took a lot of a lot of effort, and like concerted reminders, I think to myself around that and I do think a lot of the way the MBA program was structured. Also, like you know, all the standard career resources like the people that come there, recruiting staff like that are all focused around consulting and finance....Silicon Valley startups...and so a lot of the sort of resources, like standard resources, are sort of also centered around that, you know, consulting in particular, they do a really good job of trying to pull you in and making making the job sound amazing. And so I saw a lot of people that came in with a similar background to me, and kind of got pulled, pulled in that direction, which was unfortunate." (Sophie, PID 13)

Miguel, the student who organized with other MBA students to push for more sustainability focus in their programs, described how their efforts were met with resistance from senior faculty and administrators:

...some of the guys [faculty] that have been there for longer, and that are more senior...I think they saw it as a bit annoying. Honestly, it's like, you know, let us do our job here like we sit in our office. It's kind of like it felt very like they're in their ivory tower kind of like in here in the present. One of the professors even said it to me like, you know, what happens is typically there's always like some campaign. And then the student graduates, and then it's like, okay, farewell, because they have other things to do, and they no longer have the time...So yes, it was just like just trying to push on all the fronts, really, and just trying to get it across. (Miguel, PID02)

While much of the resistance to social change efforts was attributed to institutional limitations or material constraints of the business school, one student described how fellow students in fact played a role in tempering possibilities of change, particularly in relation to discussions of social issues or topics that were perceived to be outside of the business school culture (e.g., racism). She said

They don't know how to handle it, and they're immediately like, oh, no, this is not what we're here for, like shut it down. It's a weird dynamic....people don't have the language for it. And yeah people aren't used to it, I think, especially in our generation, too. (Alex, PID12)

Tentative Conclusions

Based on the exploratory interviews, we develop the notion of “tempering radicals” to describe the dynamics that students experience as internal advocates for social change in business schools. We deploy the concept of tempering radicals in a similar sense to Meyerson & Scully (1995) -- looking at how individuals in business schools work to enact social change -- but also in a different sense -- by examining how institutions constrain or temper students in this process.

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